

XIII

The Fourth Part of Darkness

"What happened to you?" Wendell whispered when Harvey reached the bottom of the lawn. "I thought we were meeting at midnight."

"I got...waylaid," Harvey said.

He'd intended to tell Wendell what had just transpired, but his friend was obviously nervous enough without being told about Lulu's fate. Harvey slipped the three survivors of the ark into his pocket and resolved only to speak of the encounter when he and Wendell were safely away from this terrible place. Just one thing stood between them and that ambition: the wall of mist.

Now, as ever, it seemed innocent enough. But that was an illusion, of course, like so many things in Mr. Hood's kingdom.

"We have to be very organized about this," Harvey said to Wendell. "Once we're in the wall we lose our sense of direction. So we have to be sure we keep walking in a straight line, and not let the mist turn us around."

"How do we do that?" said Wendell.

"I think one of us should go in first, and the other one keep hold of his hand."

"Me," said Wendell, eagerly. "I want to be first."

"No problem. Then I'll keep my back to the House, and keep guiding you. Who knows, maybe the wall's so thin you'll just be able to pull me through."

"We can hope," Wendell said.

"Are you ready?" Harvey asked, extending his hand.

Wendell took it. "Whenever you are," he said.

"Then let's get out of here "

Wendell nodded, and stepped into the mist. Instantly, Harvey felt his grip tighten.

"Don't...let...go..." Wendell said, his voice already remote although he was just a pace away.

"Just keep walking," Harvey said, as they reached arm's length. "Any sign of-

Before he could finish his question a noise from the House behind him sealed his lips. He glanced back. The front door was open, and a light was burning in the hall, throwing into silhouette the figure rushing down the porch steps. It was Mrs. Griffin.

The noise he'd heard was not from her lips, however. Nothing human could make such a din. He saw Mrs. Griffin glance up toward the roof as she hurried down the lawn, and following her gaze, saw the noise-maker rising against the stars.

He knew its name, even though he couldn't see its face. Hood had four servants, and he'd met only three: Rictus, Jive and Marr. Here was the fourth: Carna, the tooth-stealer; Carna, the devourer; Carna, the beast Mrs. Griffin had hoped Harvey would never meet.

"Back to the House, child!" Mrs. Griffin yelled as the din of vast wings filled the air, "Quickly! Quickly!"

Harvey pulled on Wendell's arm, yelling to him as he did so, but Wendell had a whiff of freedom in his nostrils and wasn't about to give it up.

"What are you waiting for?" Mrs. Griffin yelled. "Get away from there or it'll take off your head!"

Harvey glanced up at the swooping beast, and knew this was no lie. Carna's jaws were wide enough to snap him in half with a single bite. But he couldn't leave Wendell in the mist. They'd begun this adventure together, and that was

how they would finish it, dead or alive. He had no choice but to step into the mist himself, and hope that Wendell had snatched a glimpse of the world outside, and could pull him through to the street.

As he took that step, he heard Mrs. Griffin say something about leading the way; then he was blinded by the chill of the mist, and the sound of her voice became a garbled whisper.

Carna's shrieks were not so hushed, however. They pierced the murk, skewering Harvey's thoughts the way its teeth would skewer his head if the beast caught up with him.

"Wendell?" Harvey yelled. "It's coming for us!"

He caught a glimpse of a figure up ahead of him, then of Wendell's face, smeared by the mist, turning to say:

"There's no way out!"

"There has to be!"

"I can't find it!" Wendell said, his reply almost drowned out by the din of Carna's shrieks.

Harvey glanced back the way he'd come, more afraid not to know how close the creature was than to see it, however terrifying the sight. A veil of mist swirled in front of him, but he glimpsed Carna's form as the beast descended. It was the most monstrous of the brood: its skin rotted and stretched over barbed and polished bone, its throat a nest of snaky tongues, its jaws set with hundreds of teeth.

This is the end, Harvey thought. I've only been alive ten years and five months and I'm going to have my head bitten off.

Then, from the corner of his eye, a strange sight. Mrs. Griffin's arms, reaching into the mist, and dropping Blue-Cat to the ground.

"He's got a good sense of direction!" Harvey heard her say. "Follow him! Follow him!"

He didn't need a second invitation. Nor did Blue-Cat. Tail up, it padded off, and Harvey hauled on Wendell's arm to drag him in pursuit. The cat was quick, but so was Harvey. He kept his eyes glued on that bright tail, even when the rush of wings behind him announced that Carna had entered the mist and was almost upon them.

Two strides; three strides; four. And now the mist seemed to be thinning.

He heard Wendell whooping for joy-"The street!" he yelled, "I see it!"-and the next moment Harvey saw it too, the sidewalks wet with rain and shining in the lamplight.

Now he dared look back, and there was Carna, its jaws a yard from them.

He let go of Wendell's arm and pushed his friend toward the street, ducking as he did so. Carna's lower jaw scraped his spine, but the beast was moving too fast to check itself, and instead of wheeling around to scoop up its quarry it flew on, out into the real world.

Wendell was already there.; Harvey joined him a moment later.

"We did it!" Wendell yelled. "We did it!"

"So did Carna!" Harvey said, pointing up at the beast as it rose against the cloudy sky and turned to come back for them.

"It wants to drive us back inside!" Harvey said.

"I'm not going!" Wendell cried. "Never! I'm never going in there again!"

Carna heard his defiance. Its blazing eyes fixed on him and it came down like a thunderbolt, its shriek echoing through the midnight streets.

"Run!" Harvey said.

But Carna's stare had rooted Wendell to the spot. Harvey grabbed hold of him and was about to make a run for it when he heard the beast's cry change.

Triumph became doubt; doubt became pain; and suddenly Carna wasn't swooping but falling, holes opening in its wings as though a horde of invisible moths was eating at their fabric.

It labored to climb the air again, but its wounded wings refused their duty, and seconds later it struck the street so hard it bit off a dozen of its tongues, and scattered half a hundred teeth at the boys' feet. The fall didn't kill it, however. Though agonized by its wounds, it hauled itself up onto the spiky crutches of its wings and began to drag itself back toward the wall. Even now, in this wretched state, it was ferocious, and with snaps to right and left drove Harvey and Wendell out of its path.

"It can't survive out here..." Wendell realized aloud, "...it's dying."

Harvey wished he had some weapon to keep the beast from returning to safety, but he had to be content with the sight of its defeat. If it had not wanted their flesh so badly, he thought, it wouldn't have come after them at such speed, and brought this pain and humiliation upon itself. There was a lesson there, if he could only remember it. Evil, however powerful it seemed, could be undone by its own appetite.

Then the creature was gone, a curtain of mist drawn over its retreat.

There was only one sign remaining of the mysteries that lay on the other side of the wall: the face of Blue-Cat, gazing out at the world that he, like all the occupants of the Holiday House, could never explore. His azure gaze met Harvey's for a moment; then he looked back toward his prison, as though he heard Mrs. Griffin's summons, and with a sorrowful sigh turned and traipsed away.

"Weird," said Wendell, as he stared at the rainy streets. "It's as though I never left"

"Is it?" said Harvey. He wasn't so sure. He felt different; marked by this adventure.

"I wonder if we'll even remember we came here in a week's time?"

"Oh, I'll remember," Harvey said. "I've got a few souvenirs."

He dug into his pocket in search of the figures from the ark. Even as he pulled them out he felt them crumbling, as the real world took its toll on them. "Illusions..." he murmured as they turned to dust and ran away between his fingers.

"Who cares?" said Wendell. "It's time to go home. And that's no illusion."

XIV

Time Was

It took the boys an hour to reach the center of town, and there-given that their houses lay in opposite directions-they parted company. They exchanged addresses before they did so, promising to contact each other in a day or two, so that they could each support the other's account of the Holiday House. It would be difficult to make people believe all that had happened to them, but perhaps they'd have a better chance if two voices told the same tale.

"I know what you did back there," Wendell said just before they parted.

"You saved my life."

"You would have done the same thing for me," Harvey said.

Wendell looked doubtful. "I might have wanted to," he said, somewhat abashed, "but I've never been very brave."

"We escaped together," Harvey said. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Really?"

"Really."

Wendell brightened at this. "Yeah," he said. "I guess that's right."

Well...be seein' ya."

And, with that, they went their separate ways.

It was still several hours before daybreak, and the streets were virtually

deserted, so for Harvey it was a long, lonely trudge home. He was tired, and a little saddened by his farewell to Wendell, but the thought of the welcome he'd get when he reached his own doorstep put a spring in his heels.

Several times he wondered if he'd gone astray, because the streets he passed through were unfamiliar. One neighborhood was extremely fancy, the houses and the cars parked outside them slicker than anything he'd set eyes on. Another was virtually a wasteland, the houses half rubble, the streets strewn with garbage. But his sense of direction served him well. As the East began to pale, and the birds in the trees started their twitterings, he rounded the corner of his street. His weary legs broke into a joyful dash, and brought him to the step panting for breath and ready to fall into his parents' arms.

He knocked on the door. There was no sound from the house at first, which didn't surprise him given the hour. He knocked again, and again. Finally a light was turned on and he heard somebody coming to the door.

"Who is it?" said his father from behind the closed door. "Do you know what time it is?"

"It's me," said Harvey.

Then came the sound of bolts being drawn aside, and the door was opened a crack.

"Who's me?" said the man peering out at him.

He looked kindly enough, Harvey thought, but it wasn't his father. This was a much older man, his hair almost white, his face thin. He had a badly trimmed mustache, and a furrow of a frown.

"What do you want?" he said.

Before Harvey could reply a woman's voice said:

"Come away from the door."

He couldn't see the second speaker yet, but he caught a glimpse of the wallpaper in the hallway, and the pictures on the wall. To his relief he saw that this was not his house at all. He'd obviously made a simple mistake, and knocked on the wrong door.

"I'm sorry," he said, backing away. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Who are you looking for?" the man wanted to know, opening the door a little wider now. "Are you one of the Smith kids?"

He started to dig in the pocket of his dressing gown, and brought out a pair of spectacles.

He can't even see me properly, Harvey thought: poor old man.

But before the spectacles reached the bridge of the man's nose his wife appeared behind him, and Harvey's legs almost folded up beneath him at the sight of her.

She was old, this woman, her hair almost as colorless as her husband's, and her face even more lined and sorrowful. But Harvey knew that face better than any on earth. It was the first face he'd ever loved. It was his mother.

"Mom?" he murmured.

The woman stopped and stared out through the open door at the boy standing on the step, her eyes filling up with tears. She could barely breathe the word she said next.

"Harvey?"

"Mom?...Mom, it is you, isn't it?"

By now the man had put on his spectacles, and peered through them with his eyes wide.

"It's not possible," he said flatly. "This can't be Harvey."

"It's him," said his wife. "It's our Harvey. He's come home."

The man shook his head. "After all these years?" he said. "He'd be a man by now. He'd be a grown man. This is just a boy."

"It's him, I tell you."

"No!" the man replied, angry now. "It's some prank. Somebody trying to

break our hearts. As if they're not broken enough."

He started to slam the door, but Harvey's mom caught hold of it.

"Look at him," she said. "Look at his clothes. That's what he was wearing the night he left us."

"How do you know?"

"You think I don't remember?"

"It's thirty-one years ago," said Harvey's father, still staring at the boy on the step. "This can't...can't be..." He faltered as slow recognition spread over his face. "Oh my Lord," he said, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper, "...it is him, isn't it?"

"I told you," his wife replied,

"Are you some kind of ghost?" he asked Harvey.

"Oh for goodness' sake," Harvey's mom said. "He's no ghost!" She slipped past her husband, and out onto the step. "I don't know how it's possible, and I don't care," she said, opening her arms to Harvey. "All I know is, our little boy's come home to us."

Harvey couldn't speak. There were too many tears in his throat, and in his nose and in his eyes. All he could do was stumble into his mother's arms. It was wonderful to feel her hands stroke his hair and her fingers wipe his cheeks.

"Oh Harvey, Harvey, Harvey," she sobbed. "We thought we'd never see you again." She kissed him over and over. "We thought you'd gone forever."

"How's this possible?" his father still wanted to know.

"I kept praying," his mother said.

Harvey had another answer, though he didn't voice it. The moment he'd set eyes on his mother-so changed, so sorrowful-it was instantly clear what a terrible trick Hood's House had played upon them all. For every day he'd spent there a year had gone by here in the real world. Every morning while he'd played in the spring warmth, months had passed. In the afternoon, while he'd lazed in the summer sun, the same. And those haunted twilights, which had seemed so brief, had been another span of months, as had the Christmas nights, full of snow and presents. They'd all slipped by so easily, and though he had only aged a month, his mom and dad had lived in sadness for thirty-one years, thinking that their little boy had gone forever.

That had almost been the case. If he'd remained in the House of Illusions, distracted by its petty pleasures, a whole lifetime would have gone by here in the real world, and his soul would have become Hood's property. He would have joined the fish circling in the lake; and circling; and circling. He shuddered at the thought.

"You're cold, sweetie," his mother said. "Let's get you inside." He sniffed hard, and cleared his tears with the back of his hand. "I'm so tired," he said.

"I'll make a bed for you straight away."

"No. I want to tell you what happened before I go to sleep," Harvey replied. "It's a long story. Thirty-one years long."

XV

New Nightmares

It was a more difficult tale to tell than he expected it to be. Though some of the details were clear in his head-Rictus's first appearance; the sinking of the ark; his and Wendell's escape-there was much else he could not properly remember. It was as though the mist he'd strode through had seeped into his head, and had there drawn a veil over the House and much of what it

contained.

"I remember speaking to you on the phone two or three times," he said.

"You didn't speak to us, honey," his mom replied.

"Then that was just another trick," Harvey said. "I should have known."

"But who was playing all those tricks?" his father demanded. "If this House exists-I say if-then whoever owns it kidnapped you and somehow kept you from growing up. Maybe he froze you-"

"No," said Harvey. "It was warm there, except when the snow came down, of course."

"There has to be some sane explanation."

"There is," said Harvey. "It was magic."

His father shook his head. "That's a child's answer," he said. "And I'm not a child anymore."

"And I know what I know," said Harvey firmly.

"It isn't very much, honey," his mom said.

"I wish I could remember more."

She put a comforting arm around his shoulder. "Never mind," she said, "we'll talk about it when you've had a rest."

"Could you find this House again?" his father asked him.

"Yes," Harvey replied, though his skin ran with chills at the thought of going back. "I think so"

"Then that's what we'll do."

"I don't want him going back to that place," his mother said.

"We have to know it exists before we report it to the police. You understand that, don't you, son?"

Harvey nodded. "It sounds like something I made up, I know. But it's not. I swear it's not."

"Come on, sweetie," his mother said. "I'm afraid your room's changed a bit, but it's still comfortable. I kept it just as you'd left it for years and years, hoping you'd find your way home. Then I realized if you ever did come back you'd be a grown man, and you wouldn't want it decorated with rocket ships and parrots. So we had the decorators in. It's completely different now."

"I don't mind," Harvey said. "It's home, and that's all I care about."

In the early afternoon, as he slept in his old room, it rained: a hard March rain that beat against the window and slapped on the sill. The sound woke him. He sat up in bed with the hairs at his nape pricking and knew that he'd been dreaming of Lulu. Poor, lost Lulu, dragging her misshapen body through the bushes, her flipper hand clutching the ark animals she'd dredged up from the mud.

The thought of her unhappiness was unbearable. How could he ever hope to live in the world to which he'd returned, knowing that she remained Hood's prisoner?

"I'll find you," he murmured to himself. "I will, I swear..."

Then he lay back on the cold pillow, and listened to the sound of rain until sleep crept over him.

Exhausted by his travels and traumas, he didn't wake again until the following morning. The rain had cleared. It was time to lay plans.

"I bought a map of the whole of Millsap," his father said, unfolding his purchase and spreading it over the kitchen table. "There's our house." He had already marked the place with a cross. "Now, do you remember any of the street names around Hood's place?"

Harvey shook his head. "I was too busy escaping," he said.

"Were there any particular buildings you saw?"

"It was dark, and rainy."

"So we just have to trust to luck."

"We'll find it," Harvey said. "Even if it takes all week."

It was easier said than done. More than three decades had passed since he'd first made his way through the town with Rictus, and countless things had changed. There were new plazas and new slums; new cars on the streets and new aircraft overhead. So many distractions, all keeping Harvey from the trail.

"I don't know which way is which," he admitted, after they'd been searching for half a day. "Nothing's the way I remember it."

"We'll keep going," his father said. "It'll all come clear."

It didn't. They spent the rest of the day wandering around, hoping that some Night would trigger a memory, but it was frustrating business. Every now and then, in some square or street, Harvey would say: "Maybe this is it," and they'd head off in one direction or another, only to find that the trail grew cold a few blocks on.

That evening, his father quizzed him again.

"If you could only remember what the House looked like," he said, "I could describe it to people."

"It was big, I remember that. And old. I'm sure it was very old."

"Could you draw it?"

"I could try."

He did just that, and though he wasn't much of an artist his hand seemed to remember more than his brain had, because after a half hour he had drawn the House in considerable detail. His father was pleased.

"We'll take this with us tomorrow," he said. "Maybe somebody will recognize it."

But the second day was just as frustrating as the first. Nobody knew the House that Harvey had drawn, nor anything remotely like it. By the end of the afternoon, Harvey's father was getting short-tempered.

"It's useless!" he said. "I must have asked five hundred people and not one of them—not one—even vaguely recognized the place."

"It's not surprising," said Harvey. "I don't think anyone who saw the House—besides me and Wendell—ever escaped before."

"We should just repeat all this to the police," his mother said, "and let them deal with it."

"And what do we tell them?" his father said, raising his voice. "That we think there's a House out there that hides in a mist, and steals children with magic? It's ridiculous!"

"Calm down, calm down," Harvey's mother said. "We'll talk about this after we've eaten."

They trudged home, ate and discussed the whole problem again, but without finding any solutions. Mr. Hood had laid his traps carefully over the years, protecting himself from the laws of the real world. Safe behind the mists of his illusion, he'd most likely already found two new and unwitting prisoners to replace Harvey and Wendell. It seemed his evil would go on, undiscovered and unpunished.

The following day Harvey's father made an announcement.

"This search is getting us nowhere," he said. "We're going to give it up!"

"Are you going to the police?" his wife asked him.

"Yes. And they'll want Harvey to tell them everything he knows. It's going to be difficult."

"They won't believe me," Harvey said.

"That's why I'm going to talk to them first," his father said. "I'll find somebody who'll listen."

He left soon after breakfast, with a worried expression on his face.

"This is all my fault," Harvey said to his mom. "We lost all that time together, just because I was bored."

"Don't blame yourself," she said. "We're all tempted to do things we regret once in a while. Sometimes we choose badly and make mistake

"I just wish I knew how to unmake it," Harvey replied.

His mother went out shopping in the middle of the morning, and left Harvey haunted by that thought. Was there some way to undo the damage that had been done? To take back the stolen years, and live them here, with the people who loved him, and whom he loved dearly in return?

He was sitting at his bedroom window, trying to puzzle the problem out, when he saw a forlorn figure at the street corner. He threw open the window and yelled down to him:

"Wendell! Wendell! Over here!"

Then he raced downstairs. By the time he opened the door his friend was on the step, his face red and wet with tears and sweat.

"What happened?" he said. "Everything's changed." His words were punctuated by hiccups. "My dad divorced my mom and my mom's so old, Harvey, and fat as a house." He wiped his running nose with the back of his hand, and sniffed hard. "It wasn't supposed to be this way!" he said. "Well, was it?"

Harvey did his best to explain how the House had deceived them, but Wendell was in no mood for theory. He just wanted the nightmare to be over.

"I want things the way they were," he wailed.

"My dad's gone to the police," Harvey said. "He's going to tell them everything."

"That won't do any good," Wendell said despairingly. "They'll never find the House."

"You're right," Harvey said. "I went to look for it with my mom and dad, but it was no use. It's hiding."

"Well it's bound to hide from them, stupid," Wendell said. "It doesn't want grown-ups."

"You're right," said Harvey. "It wants children. And I bet it wants you and me more than ever."

"How'd you reckon that?"

"It almost had us. It almost ate us alive."

"So you think it's got a taste for us?"

"I'm sure of it"

Wendell stared at his feet for a moment. "You think we should go back, don't you?"

"I don't think any of those grown-ups-my dad, your mom, the police-are ever going to find the House. If we want all those years back, we have to get them for ourselves."

"I don't much like the idea," Wendell confessed.

"Neither do I," he said, thinking as he spoke that he'd have to leave a note for his mom and dad, so that they wouldn't think his return had been a dream.

"We have to go," he said. "We don't have any choice."

"So when do we start?"

"Now!" said Harvey grimly. "We've lost, too much time already."

XVI

Back to the Happy Land

It was as if the House knew that they were coming back and was calling to them. As soon as they stepped out into the street their feet seemed to know the way. All they had to do was let them lead.

"What do we do when we get there?" Wendell wanted to know. "I mean, we only just escaped with our lives last time-"

"Mrs. Griffin will help us," Harvey said.

Wendell's breath quickened. "Suppose Carna bit her head off?" he said.

"Then we'll have to do it alone."

"Do what?"

"Find Hood."

"But you told me he was dead."

"I don't think being dead means much to a creature like him," Harvey said.

"He's in the house somewhere, Wendell, and we have to hunt him down whether we like it or not. He's the one who stole all those years with our moms and dads.

And we won't get them back until we face him."

"You make it sound easy," Wendell said.

"The whole House is a box of tricks," Harvey reminded him. "The seasons. The presents. They're all illusions. We have to hold on to that."

"Harvey? Look."

Wendell pointed ahead of them. Harvey knew the street at a glance. Thirtythree days ago, he'd stood here with Rictus, and listened to the tempter tell him what a fine place lay on the other side of the mist wall up ahead.

"This is it then," Harvey said.

It was strange, but he didn't feel afraid, even though he knew they were walking back into their enemy's arms. It was better to face Hood and his illusions now than to spend the rest of his life wondering about Lulu, and mourning the years he'd lost.

"Are you ready?" he asked Wendell.

"Before we go," his friend replied, "can we get just one thing s straight?

If the House is all illusions, then how come we felt the cold? And how come I got fat from eating Mrs. Griffin's pies, and-

"I don't know," Harvey cut in, doubt running a cold finger up his spine.

"I can't explain how Hood's magic works. All I know is, he took all those years away to feed himself."

"Feed?"

"Yeah. Like...like...like a vampire." This was the first time Harvey had thought of Hood that way, but it instinctively seemed right. Blood was life, and life was what w Hood fed upon. He was a vampire, sure enough. Maybe a king among vampires.

"So shouldn't we have a stake, or holy water, or something?"

"That's just in stories," Harvey said.

"But if he comes after us-

"We fight."

"Fight with what?"

Harvey shrugged. The truth was, he didn't know. But he was sure that crosses and prayers weren't going to be any use, in the battle that lay ahead.

"No more talk," he said to Wendell. "If you don't want to come, then don't."

"I didn't say that"

"Good," said Harvey, and started toward the mist.

Wendell followed on his heels, and just as Harvey stepped into the wall he snatched hold of his friend's sleeve, so that they entered as they had exited: together.

The mist closed around them like a waterlogged blanket, pressing so hard against their faces Harvey half thought it intended to smother them. But it only wished to keep them from changing their minds. A moment later a tremor moved through its folds and spat them out the other side.

It was high summer in Hood's kingdom: the lazy season. The sun, which had been hidden by rain clouds on the other side of the mist, was beaming down on the House and all that prospered around it. The trees swayed in a balmy breeze, the doors and windows of the House, its porch and chimneys, all gleamed as if newly painted.

There were welcoming songs in the eaves; welcoming smells from the kitchen; welcoming laughter through the open door. Welcome; everywhere welcome.

"I'd forgotten..." Wendell murmured.

"Forgotten what?"

"How...beautiful it is."

"Don't trust it," Harvey said. "It's all illusion, remember? All of it."

Wendell didn't reply, but wandered away toward the trees. The honeyed breeze gusted around him, as if to pluck him up. He didn't resist, but went where it led, into the dappled shade.

"Wendell!" Harvey said, following him across the lawn. "We've got to stick together."

"I'd forgotten about the tree house," Wendell said dreamily, staring up into the canopy. "We had such fun up there, remember?"

"No," said Harvey, determined not to let the past distract him from his mission here. "I don't remember."

"Yes, you do," said Wendell, smiling from ear to ear. "We worked so hard up there. I'm going up to see how it looks."

Harvey grabbed his arm.

"No you're not."

"Yes I am," he snapped back, wrenching his arm from Harvey's grip. "I can do whatever I want. You don't own me."

Harvey could see by the glazed look in Wendell's eyes that the House was already working its seductive magic. It could only be a matter of time, he knew, before his own powers of resistance were worn away. And what then? Would he forget his work here entirely, and become an empty-headed boy, laughing like a loon while his soul was sucked away?

"No!" he said aloud, "I'm not going to let you do it!"

"Do what?" said Wendell.

"We've got work to do!" Harvey told him.

"Who cares?" Wendell replied.

"I do. And so did you five minutes ago, Remember what it did to us, Wendell."

The wind in trees seemed to sigh at this.

"Aaahh..." it said, as if it now understood Harvey's purpose here, and would waft this intelligence to the ears of Mr. Hood.

Harvey didn't care. In fact, he was pleased,

"Go on," he said, as the gusts flew toward the House. "Tell him! Tell him!" He turned on Wendell. "Are you coming?" he said. "Or am I going to go in alone?"

"I don't mind going in," Wendell said cheerily. "I'm hungry."

Harvey stared hard at Wendell. "Don't you remember anything we said out there?" he demanded.

"Of course I do," Wendell replied. "We said we were going to..." He paused, frowning. "...going...to..."

"This place has stolen time that belonged to us, Wendell."

"How did it do that?" said Wendell, still frowning deeply. "It's just...just..." Again he faltered, searching for the words. "...just such a perfect day." The frown began to fade again, and a broad smile replaced it. "Who cares?" Wendell said. "I mean, on a day like this, who cares? Let's just enjoy ourselves."

Harvey shook his head. He was losing precious time here, which was exactly what Hood and the House wanted. Instead of wasting any further words on Wendell, he turned on his heel and headed toward the front door.

"Wait for me!" Wendell hollered. "Can you smell that pie?"

Harvey could, and wished he'd put some food in his belly before he'd started out on this adventure. Knowing that these tantalizing smells were all

part of Hood's repertoire wasn't enough to stop his mouth from watering or his stomach from grumbling.

All he could do was think of the dust to which his ark animals had turned when he'd stepped out into the street. The pie on the kitchen table was probably made of the same bitter stuff, concealed beneath a veneer of sweetness. He held on to that thought as best he could, knowing that the House into which he was about to step would be full of such blandishments.

With Wendell again trailing a step behind, he climbed the porch steps and marched into the House. The moment they were both inside, the door slammed behind them. Harvey reeled around, his skin crawling. It was not the wind that had thrown the door shut.

It was Rictus.

XVII

Cook, Cat and Coffin

"Great to have you back, boy," Rictus said, his smile as wide as ever. "I told everyone you wouldn't be able to stay away. Nobody believed me. He's gone, they said, he's gone. But I knew better." He started to wander toward Harvey. "I knew you wouldn't be satisfied with a little visit...not with so much fun still to be had."

"I'm hungry," Wendell whined.

"Help yourselves!" Rictus grinned.

Wendell was off at a sprint, into the kitchen.

"Oh boy oh boy oh boy!" he hollered. "Look at all this food."

Harvey didn't reply.

"Aren't you hungry?" Rictus said, raising an eyebrow high above his spectacles. He cupped his hand behind his ear. "That sounds like an empty belly to me."

"Where's Mrs. Griffin?" Harvey said.

"Oh...she's around," Rictus said mischievously. "But she's getting old.

She takes to her bed a good deal these days, so we laid her down somewhere safe and sound."

As he spoke there was a mewling sound from the living room, and there at the door stood Stew-Cat. Rictus scowled. "Get out of here, pussy!" he spat.

"Can't you see we're having a conversation?"

But Stew-Cat wasn't about to be intimidated. She sauntered over to Harvey, rubbing herself against his legs.

"What do you want?" Harvey said, going down on his haunches to stroke her. She purred loudly.

"Hey, that's fine and dandy," Rictus said, putting off his anger in favor of a freshly polished smile. "You like the cat. The cat likes you. Everybody's happy."

"I'm not happy," Harvey said.

"And why's that?"

"I left all my presents here, and I don't know where."

"No problem," said Rictus. "I'll find 'em for you."

"Would you do that?" Harvey said.

"Sure, kid," said Rictus, persuaded that his charm was working again.

"That's what we're all here for: to give you whatever your heart desires."

"I think maybe I left them up in my bedroom," Harvey suggested.

"You know I think I saw 'em up there," Rictus replied. "You stay right here. I'll be back."

He took himself up the stairs two and three at a time, whistling tunelessly through his teeth as he ascended. Harvey waited until he disappeared

from sight and then went to check on Wendell, letting Stew-Cat slip away.

"Ah, now, look at this!" a voice said as he appeared at the kitchen door.

It was Jive. He was standing at the stove, as sinewy as ever, juggling eggs with one hand and tossing pancakes in a pan with the other.

"What do you fancy?" he said. "Sweet or savory?"

"Nothing," Harvey said.

"It's all good," Wendell piped up. He was almost hidden behind a wall of filled plates. "Try the apple turnovers! They're great!"

Harvey was sorely tempted. The buffet looked wonderfully tempting. But it was dust. He had to keep remembering that.

"Maybe later," he said, averting his eyes from the heaps of syrup-drenched waffles and bowls of ice cream.

"Where are you going?" Jive wanted to know.

"Mr. Rictus is finding a few presents for me," Harvey said.

Jive smiled with satisfaction. "So you're getting back into the swing of things, kiddo!" he said. "Good for you!"

"I've missed being here," Harvey replied.

He didn't linger, just in case Jive saw the lie in his eyes, but turned and headed back into the hallway. Stew-Cat was still there, staring at him.

"What is it?" he said.

The cat took off toward the stairs, then stopped and cast a backward glance.

"Have you something to show me?" Harvey whispered.

At this, the cat bounded off again. Harvey followed, expecting her to lead the way upstairs. But before she reached the bottom step she veered off to her left, and led Harvey down a narrow passage to a door he had never even noticed before.

He rattled the handle, but the door was locked. Turning to look for Stew-Cat, he found her rubbing her arched back against the leg of a small table set nearby. On the table was a carved wooden box. In the box was a key.

He went back to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open. There was a flight of wooden steps in front of him, leading down into a darkness from which a sour, dank smell rose. He might have declined to descend had Stew-Cat not hurried on past him, down into the murk.

With his fingers trailing on the damp walls to the left and right of him, he followed Stew-Cat to the bottom of the flight, counting the steps as he went. There were fifty-two, and by the time he had descended them all his eyes had become reasonably accustomed to the gloom. The cellar was cavernous but empty, except for a litter of rubble and a large wooden box, which lay in the dust maybe a dozen yards from where he stood.

"What is it?" he hissed to Stew-Cat, knowing the creature had no way of replying, but hoping for some sign nevertheless.

Stew-Cat's only answer was to run across the floor and leap nimbly up onto the box, where it began to claw at the wood.

Harvey's curiosity was stronger than his fear, but not so much stronger that he dashed to pull off the lid. He approached as though the box were some sleeping beast, which for all he knew it was. The closer he got the more it resembled a crude coffin; but what kind of coffin was sealed with a padlock? Was this where Carna had been laid, perhaps, after the beast had dragged its wounded body back home? Was it even now listening to Stew-Cat scratch on the lid, waiting for release?

As he came within a yard of the casket, however, he laid eyes on a clue to its contents: an apron string, left hanging out of the box by whoever had locked it. He knew of only one person in the House who wore an apron.

"Mrs. Griffin!" he whispered, digging his fingernails under the lid. "Mrs. Griffin? Are you in there?"

There was a muffled thump from inside.

"I'm going to get you out," he promised, hauling on the lid as hard as he could.

He didn't have the strength to break the lock. In desperation he began to search the cellar, looking for some tool or other, and found himself two sizable rocks. Hefting them, he returned to the casket.

"This is going to be noisy," he warned Mrs. Griffin.

Then, using one stone as a kind of chisel and the other as a hammer, he assaulted the lock. Blue sparks flew as he struck at the metal, but he seemed to be making no impression until, all of a sudden, the lock gave a loud crack and fell to the ground.

He paused for a moment, a feather of doubt brushing his brow. Suppose it was Carna's coffin? Then he threw the rocks aside and hauled off the lid.

XVII

The Bitter Truth

He almost shouted out loud, seeing the terrible state that poor Mrs. Griffin was in. She was staring up at him with wild eyes, her hair pulled out in clawfuls, her face purple with bruises. A foul rag had been stuffed into her mouth. Harvey carefully removed it, and she began to speak, her voice a hoarse whisper.

"Thank you, my sweet, thank you," she said. "But oh, you shouldn't have come back. It's too dangerous here."

"Who did this to you?"

"Jive and Rictus."

"But he ordered it, didn't he?" Harvey said, helping her up. "Don't tell me he's dead, because I know that doesn't matter. Hood's here in the House, isn't he?"

"Yes," she said, holding on to him as she climbed up out of the box. "Yes, he's here. But not in the way you think..." She began to weep, the tears clogging her words.

"It's all right," Harvey said. "Everything's going to be all right."

Her fingers went up to her face, and touched the tears. "I thought...I thought I'd never cry again," she said. "Look what you've done!"

"I'm sorry," said Harvey.

"Oh no, my sweet, don't be sorry. It's wonderful." She smiled through her tears. "You've broken his curse on me."

"What curse?"

"Oh, it's a long story."

"I want to hear."

"I was the first child who ever came to Hood's House," she said. "This was many, many years ago. I was nine when I first walked up the front path. I'd run away from home, you see."

"Why?"

"My cat had died and my father refused to buy me another. And what do you think Rictus gave me the very day I arrived?"

"Three cats," said Harvey.

"You know how this House works, don't you?"

Harvey nodded. "It gives you whatever you think you want."

"And I wanted cats, and a home, and-"

"What?"

"Another father." She shivered with fear, remembering the horror. "I met

Hood that night. At least, I heard his voice."

Stew-Cat had come to her feet, and she paused to stoop and gather the creature into her arms.

"Where did you hear him?" Harvey asked.

"In the attic at the top of the House. And he said to me: If you stay here, forever and ever, you'll never die. You'll grow old, but you'll live until the end of time, and never weep again."

"And that's what you wanted?"

"It was stupid, but yes, I did. I was afraid, you see. Afraid of being put into the ground like my cat." A new wave of tears came, running down her pale cheeks. "I was running away from Death-

"-straight into its House," Harvey said.

"Oh no, child," Mrs. Griffin said. "Hood isn't Death." She wiped away her tears, so as to see Harvey more clearly. "Death is a natural thing. Hood isn't.

I would welcome Death now, like a friend I'd driven away from my door. I've seen too much, my sweet. Too many seasons, too many children.

"Why didn't you try and stop him?"

"I have no power against him. All I could do was give the children who came here as much happiness as I knew how."

"So how old are you?" Harvey asked her.

"Who knows?" she replied, laying her cheek against Stew-Cat's fur. "I grew up and old in a matter of days, but then the passage of time seemed to lose its hold on me. Sometimes I've wanted to ask one of the children: What year is it in the world outside?"

"I can tell you."

"Don't," she said, putting her finger to her lips. "I don't want to know how the years have flown. It would hurt too much."

"What do you want, then?"

"To die," she said, with a little smile. "To slip out of this skin, and go to the stars."

"Is that what happens?"

"It's what I believe," she said. "But Hood won't let me die. Not ever.

That'll be his revenge on me, for helping you to escape. He already had Blue-Cat murdered, for showing you the way out."

"Hood's going to let you go," Harvey said. "I promise. I'm going to make him."

She shook her head. "You're so brave, my sweet," she said. "But he won't let any of us go. There's such a terrible emptiness inside him. He wants to fill it with souls, but it's a pit. A bottomless pit-

"-and you're both heading for it," said an oily voice. The speaker was Marr. She was oozing down the stairs. "We've been looking for you up and down," she said to Harvey. "You'd better come with me, child."

She extended her arms in Harvey's direction. He remembered all too well her transforming touch. "Come! Come!" she said. "I might still get you out of trouble, if you let me make something humble of you. He likes humble things, does Mr. Hood. Fleas; worms; scabby dogs. Come to me, child! Quickly!"

Harvey looked around the cellar. There were no other ways out. If he was to get Mrs. Griffin up into the sun it had to be by way of the stairs, and Marr was standing in front of them.

He took a step in her direction. She smiled toothlessly.

"Good, child, good," she said.

"Don't," Mrs. Griffin said. "She'll hurt you."

"Hush, woman!" Mary said. "We're going to have to nail that lid down next time !" Her Greasy green eyes swiveled back in Harvey's direction. "He knows what's good for him. Don't you, boy?"

Harvey didn't reply. He simply kept walking toward Marr, whose fingers

seemed to be growing like a snail's horns, reaching out to fix upon his face. "You've been such an obedient boy," Marr went on. "Maybe I won't turn you into a worm after all. What would you like to be? Tell me. tell me what's in your heart..."

"Never mind my heart," Harvey said, reaching out toward Marr. "What about yours?"

A puzzled look came over Marr's face. "Mine?" she said.

"Yes," said Harvey. "What do you dream of being?"

"I never dream," she said defiantly.

"You should try it," Harvey told her. "If you can change me into a worm, or a bat, what could you do for yourself?"

The defiance on her face became bafflement, and the bafflement turned to panic. Her outstretched fingers began to retreat into themselves. Harvey reached for them like lightning, however, interweaving his fingers with hers.

"What do you want to be?" he said to her. "Think!"

She started to struggle, and he felt her magic surging through her fingers into his, attempting to work some change on him. But he didn't want to be a vampire bat anymore, and he certainly didn't want to be a worm. He was quite happy to be himself. The magic therefore had no hold on him; instead it flowed back into Marr, who began to shake as though she were being dipped in icy water.

"What...are...you...doing?" she demanded.

"Tell me what's in your heart," he said, returning her invitation.

"I'm not telling you!" she replied, still trying to wrest her fingers free of his.

But she was not used to having her victims resist her this way. Her muscles were soft and flabby. She pulled and pulled, but she couldn't escape him.

"Leave me alone!" she said. "If you harm me Mr. Hood will have your head."

"I'm not harming you," Harvey replied. "I'm just letting you have your dreams, the way you let me have mine."

"I don't want them!" she yelled, struggling more than ever.

He wouldn't let her go. Instead, he drew closer to her, as if to wrap her up in his arms. She started to spit at him—great gobs of slime—but he wiped them from his face and kept approaching her.

"No..." she began to murmur, "...no..."

But she couldn't keep the magic she'd intended for him from working on her own skin and bones. Her fat face began to soften and run like melting wax; her body sagged in its ragged coat, and a greenish gruel began to pour out onto the floor.

"Oh..." she sobbed, "...you damnable child..."

What dream was this, Harvey wondered, that was turning Marr to mush? She was growing smaller all the time, her clothes dropping off her as her body shrank, her voice becoming thin. It could only be moments before she disappeared altogether.

"What do you dream about?" Harvey said, as Marr's fingers ran away between his own like brackish water.

"I dream of nothing..." Marr replied, her eyes sinking back into her disintegrating skull, "...and that's...what...I've...become..." She was almost lost in the folds of her clothes...nothing..." she said again. She was no more than a dirty puddle now; a puddle with a fading voice. "...nothing..."

Then she was gone, devoured by her own magic.

"You did it!" Mrs. Griffin said. "Child, you did it!"

"One down, three to go," Harvey said.

"Three?"

"Rictus, Jive and Hood himself."

"You're forgetting Carna."

"Is it still alive?"

Mrs. Griffin nodded. "I'm afraid I've heard its shrieks every night. It wants revenge."

"And I want my life back," Harvey said, taking her by the arm and escorting her (still carrying Stew-Cat) to the bottom of the stairs. "I'm going to get it, Mrs. Griffin. Whatever it takes, I'm going to get it."

Mrs. Griffin glanced back at the heap of clothes that marked the place where Marr had vanished into thin air.

"Maybe you can" she said, with astonishment in her voice. "Of all the children who've come here, maybe you're the one who can beat Hood at his own game."